



Changing the Viewing Angle: Working with Museums in Ukraine

by Linda Norris

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On January 3, 2009, I looked out an airplane window at a flat landscape of only black, gray, and white. “What am I doing here?” I wondered. That snowy landscape was my introduction to Ukraine and the start of two visits of four months each, one in 2009 and one in 2010, to work with museum colleagues as a United States Fulbright Scholar. The Fulbright Program, established in 1946, has a simple goal: “to increase mutual understanding between the people of the United States and the people of other countries.” Most Fulbright Scholars are university professors, but some nations, including Ukraine, make a particular effort to encourage practitioners such as museum professionals, librarians, or journalists whose work can contribute to the development of civil society. As a teaching Fulbright Scholar my work included teaching a graduate level course on Learning in Museums in 2009. During both visits my primary focus was on professional development in museums through workshops and direct consultations with museum colleagues throughout Ukraine.

Like many museum visitors, I’m a life-long learner. I didn’t know much about Ukraine when I applied for the Fulbright. My primary goal was to challenge myself, to find new ways to think about my work, and to embrace new experiences. I did not speak Ukrainian or Russian and had little understanding of Ukraine’s complex history. My proposal was to develop workshops about different aspects of museum work with an emphasis on exhibitions and interpretation. Over the eight months I traveled hundreds of miles by train, bus, and plane, presented more than a dozen workshops to hundreds of colleagues, worked directly at ten or so museums on issues of interest to them, visited dozens of other museums, and learned

more about myself and my work than I ever could have imagined.

Ukraine became an independent nation in 1992 upon the break-up of the Soviet Union, less than 20 years ago. And of course, a newly born democracy does not sweep away all the authoritarian structures that came before—in museums or in society at large. Ukraine’s museums today are a complex mix of new ideas and old thinking.

This past spring, my workshops focused on the concept of a visitor-friendly museum, drawing upon Beverly Serrell’s work on judging exhibitions from a visitor-friendly perspective (2006), Nina Simon’s book *The Participatory Museum* (2010), educational psychologist Howard Gardner’s work (2003) on multiple intelligences, the USS Constitution’s work on family learning (2010), and varied perspectives about what makes a welcoming museum—on every level—in current museum practice in the United States. (I realize that museums in Western Europe, the Americas, Australia, and other countries follow many of these same practices, but my teaching came from the resources in the U.S. that I know best.)

What are museums for?

In the Soviet Union museums were considered important propaganda vehicles. In history museums, 50% of exhibitions were to be devoted to the post-Russian Revolution story while earlier history was cast solely in terms of class struggle. There was a single truth, dictated from on high. All museums were government museums and operated within the framework of the State Ministry of Culture. It can certainly be argued that U.S. museums have also served as agents of propaganda but the presence of a

top-down ministry provides a very different framework, producing the same approach in every museum. Even today, the Ukrainian Ministry of Culture decrees that every museum produce exhibitions on particular topics. For instance, this year on the 65th anniversary of the end of the Great Patriotic War, every museum was instructed to provide an exhibition about some aspect of the war.



Map of Ukraine from Wikipedia Commons. Accessed August 7, 2010.

Who are museums for?

My understanding of Ukrainian museums, culture, and history was deeply shaped by visits to dozens of museums and by discussions with many colleagues who shared their own family stories, their personal and professional perspectives, and their hopes for the future. Over many cups of coffee and tea colleagues including Ihor Poshyvailo of the Ivan Honchar Museum, Anna Perekhodko of the National Art Museum, Ekaterina Chuyeva of the Khanenko Museum, Irina Leonenko and others too numerous to mention answered my questions, helped me shape (and reshape) workshops, and in every way became an important network of respected resources for me.

As I began sessions about visitor-friendliness, I asked participants to reflect on an enjoyable experience they had had, as a visitor. This proved unexpectedly difficult. Said one, “I am a scientist—I cannot think like a visitor!” In other situations, I would ask people what they liked best—in an exhibition, in a group of outdoor buildings—and it was the most unexpected question, literally provoking smiles and a quizzical look. The Soviet legacy means that you were taught what was “best” and your

own opinion never mattered. You would not have a favorite painting at your museum; you would point me to the painting by the “famous Ukrainian artist” considered by scholars to be the best. Just getting colleagues to talk about their own experiences, their own likes and dislikes was the first step to encouraging them to connect more deeply with visitors.

That sense of personal understandings, of likes and dislikes, was deepened through a discussion of Howard Gardner’s work on multiple intelligences. I wanted to help participants understand that we all learn differently. I had participants take a simple quiz to help identify their own learning strengths. It turned out that Ukrainians were great test-takers, focusing deeply—and I suspect, believing that it was a quiz with right answers. But when we discussed the answers—and a participant saw that the colleague sitting next to him was a kinesthetic learner—and yes, she liked to dance; and that the colleague who liked order and numbers was a mathematical learner—everyone began to see that one size does not fit all—that all of us, as museum workers, are as different as our audiences are.

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(continued from page 33)

My goal in these visitor-friendly workshops was to introduce the concept that everything a museum does matters to the visitor, and that, in many parts of the world museums are in the process of changing, in the words of Stephen Weil (2002) “from being about something to being for somebody.”

Who will we work with?

Although everything in Soviet society was ostensibly about the collective, in fact, it was a society that did everything it could to discourage teamwork and collaboration and to encourage suspicion and mistrust. The result is a society still mired in substantial levels of wariness and a lack of communication. In my experience the most common pattern of work is to not share information and to rarely work in teams. I saw some notable exceptions: education departments in several museums where young colleagues had banded together to build a small community within a larger setting that often actively discouraged it.

Whose experience is it?

Most Ukrainian museums have very minimal text or other interpretive devices, and most expect that visitors will gain information through taking a guided excursion or by reading minimal yet lengthy wall text. Rarely does the visitor ask any questions—after all, the excursion guides are “the experts” and in fact are the junior scientists (subject matter specialists). The idea that some visitors would rather visit and explore on their own, at their own pace, and still would like to engage and learn with the objects, is almost unheard of. And as I thought about it, I realized that hands-on anything is not a particular feature of Ukrainian life. At most coffee shops you are waited on, rather than ordering at a counter;

at many markets, groceries are behind the counter and you have to ask for them; almost everywhere cash or ticket desks are a tiny window behind glass where you peer down and push your cash through the small opening. Even more unheard of was the idea that museums would be not a place of information only, but a place for conversation and dialogue.

All these things are changing, but for generations the protocols of *look, don't touch, and listen to the experts* were accepted practice. Asking my colleagues to encourage visitors to make their own meaning required a substantial leap into the unknown. But leap they did, with some great results.

In workshops, I experimented with encouraging colleagues to develop visitor-friendly interactive elements for exhibitions. After a visual presentation illustrating the criteria from the Philadelphia/Camden Informal Science Education Collaborative (PISEC) study on family-friendly exhibits (1998), the participants divided into small groups to create an interactive prototype designed to help visitors find an answer to a particular question at a particular type of museum.

Some examples:

Art Museum:

How does an artist use shapes?

One group found a computer, conducted some quick Internet research and came up with a portrait activity that used simple shapes, a classical portrait, and a portrait by a Russian constructivist artist.

Natural History Museum:

What kinds of wildlife live in a city block?
(And a great example of a lack of clarity—



Participants at a workshop in Kharkiv plan an interactive, 2010. Courtesy of the author.

did I mean a block like the Soviet-style block apartment houses or did I mean a city block?). One group designed a model apartment, with roaches under the sink and a cat in the window. You were asked to find, using sounds and images, as many species as you could.

History Museum:

How could you get from Moscow to Istanbul in 1900?

The group developed a board game that used multiple forms of transportation: horse and wagon, train, and ferry, to take you across the continent.

By designing an activity that included active learning the participants gained the chance to make theory concrete and participation enjoyable. These results are similar to many found in American museums—but in Ukraine they represented new ways of thinking. I did occasionally have a workshop participant who crossed his or her arms and remarked that this kind of activity might be okay for American museums, but that Ukrainian museums were serious, that these kinds of activities were “not for our people!” One legacy of the Soviet era is never to stand out, to be noticed. Being a lively participant in a museum interactive might have been just too much for some.



National Art Gallery, Kyiv, 2010. Courtesy of the author.

Despite the occasional less-than-enthusiastic reaction, I experienced wonderful examples of ways in which hands-on learning is meaningful for Ukrainians. After finishing one workshop in the city of Kharkiv, the interactive prototypes were laid out on the floor of a gallery. The young daughter of a staffer came in and was drawn immediately to them. She explored each one, and as visitors entered, she invited each group over and encouraged groups to try them. At several museums I saw hands-on workshops and in one case, the National Art Gallery, an annual interactive exhibition for families. There seemed to be significant strides in working



Fair-goers at the National Day of Potters at the National Ceramic Museum in Opishne making clay whistles, 2010. Courtesy of the author.

(continued from page 35)

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just a fresh eye
is helpful.

with groups, but less progress in engaging walk-in visitors, and almost no progress in exhibition interpretation. This may be due in part to the straitened financial circumstances in which museums find themselves. Permanent exhibitions are expensive to change, so many remain as a legacy of the Soviet era.

How can it work in our museum?

This year, after the workshops, I offered museums a follow-up site visit. I wanted to provide colleagues with an opportunity to talk about their own museum's issues, to strategize on ways to sell new ideas to higher-ups, and for me to share specific examples of various interpretive materials (many thanks go to American colleagues who provided me with wonderful examples to take with me both in 2009 and 2010).

Sometimes just a fresh eye is helpful. A small example: some museums offer tours in English, but the sign saying so at the cash desk is in Ukrainian—so it probably looks something like this: *Екскурсія доступна англійська!*. If you're looking for an English language tours there's no chance you can decipher this. But of course, if you're a Ukrainian speaker, you understand the sign perfectly!

At the art museum in L'viv, the education department and I discussed how to make their icon collection more engaging to those who know nothing about icons. The collection is an important one of traditional folk icons from the Carpathian region, but the only interpretive material is a very long introduction in very small type installed exactly where you would miss it as you entered each room. Each object has only the name of the icon, a date and its original location.

Using what they had learned in the workshop, the team and I brainstormed ideas. Were there photographs of the icons in their original church locations? Probably, because they had been collected during ethnographic expeditions. Could there be a map showing locations? Could the process of icon making: preparing the surface, mixing the paints, applying gold leaf, be shown step-by-step in a case? Could there be handouts in English? Could a handout address the symbols of icons—why is St. George always with the dragon? Would audio tours enhance the experience? For whom? Would music or chanting from the appropriate time period enhance the experience for both the casual visitor and the visitors who come for a spiritual experience? How can we persuade the

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scientist in charge of the icon collection to let us try any of these in the space? And after the visit, the staff there wrote, “All of that we will try to use in our future work and we hope that with time visitors will see the difference.”

How will change happen?

Although the old guard has trained young cultural professionals, there is an increasing number looking to break new ground and push the boundaries. Some are taking on new projects in their museums and attempting to change structures from within. Those colleagues are not museum directors yet, but they will be someday. Other cultural professionals are choosing to work outside of museums and forming small non-governmental organizations doing creative work in contemporary art.

As in the United States, there are multiple perspectives on what museums should be. Some Ukrainian professionals who have visited the United States find our exhibitions too didactic and too “fun.” Other travelers to the U.S. or Western Europe come back with ideas and hopes for change.

From my perspective there are three primary factors hindering real change. First, most museums still operate under an authoritarian system. Enthusiastic workers of any age are often stifled and not allowed to implement new ideas. A second factor is corruption. Ukraine is rated as one of the most corrupt countries in the world. I heard oblique stories about the sale or theft of collections, bribes to allow construction on museum property or entrance into university, and other unethical and illegal behaviors. There’s no end in sight and no easy answer at hand.

A third issue is the combined effect of inadequate financing and inadequate legislation regarding museums. The vast majority of museums are governmental entities: they report to the Ministry of Culture and by law, are not allowed to generate any additional income through gift shops, cafes, or membership. The legislation is confusing, inconsistently enforced,



Permanent exhibition at the Literature Museum, Kharkiv. This gallery focused on the chilling effect the Soviet regime had on writers. Courtesy of the author.

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(continued from page 37)

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and in desperate need of overhaul. It's not surprising that museums are a low legislative priority when Ukraine has had just 20 years to write all of its new laws.

I found myself realizing the distance that American museums have traveled during my career as I saw Ukrainian museums at the beginning of that journey. And in the same way that the path of increased visitor engagement isn't always clear to me, the future for Ukrainian museums is also unclear for my Ukrainian colleagues. As one of my most optimistic, energetic colleagues, Anna Perekhodko of the National Art Museum wrote, “I wish our museums were more open, friendly and interesting. Our museum workers need to be more open-minded, optimistic, attentive and able to collaborate.”

In my work I focus on change and results. As an independent museum professional, I'm hired for projects because I can accomplish something on time and on budget. But my Fulbright experience was not just transmitting knowledge

and skills. It forced me to look deeply at what I believe about my work and explore beliefs that I sometimes take for granted. I believe in diverse narratives, I believe in emotional connections, I believe in collaboration and that good ideas attract money. I believe that museums can be for everyone and that they can be meaningful, enjoyable places. All these concepts form the core of my professional practice, and I have seen the transformative effects they can have on museums and communities. My most indelible memories of Ukraine are of my colleagues as they began their own professional explorations.

The ability to effect any change in Ukrainian museums is a long-term process—my work was about planting seeds, rather than harvesting. As Anna Varvara of the Kharkiv Literature Museum wrote, “...when we had to create some full-fledged object for visitor's activity, it has brought new understanding, new practical experience, it has changed my viewing angle. It was the moment when my educational fantasy was started actively.” ✨